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AFRICAN AMERICAN LIBRARIANS IN KENTUCKY

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Kentucky was the first North American state to establish a free public library exclusively for African Americans. The library, located in Louisville, Kentucky, was managed by Thomas Fountain Blue, the first African American to manage a public library. The establishing of the Colored Library and Thomas Fountain Blue's Apprentice Training Program was the beginning of librarianship and libraries for African Americans in Kentucky.

Much of the recorded history of the Kentucky African American librarian centers around Thomas Fountain Blue and the Louisville Free Public Library. Few librarians know of this history or its continued path; therefore it will be told here. The history of Kentucky's African American librarians is not a separate history, nor is it a remaking of history. Rather it is a part of the history of Kentucky and all its librarians.

The first Colored library and its manager was a newsworthy event at the beginning of the 1900's. Thomas Fountain Blue and his staff were invited to meetings and conferences in various states, they were sought for consultations, all of which generated meeting reports and other written accounts.

A librarians' conference was established under Kentucky's Negro education organization. Library members and activities were recorded in the parent organization's journal.

The librarian's conference existed for more than a decade. Then, the beginnings of desegregation came about and the African American meetings, conferences, organization, and journal were abandoned in exchange for accessibility and opportunities outside the Colored libraries. The Kentucky African American librarian was sifted into the larger library system and thus began disappear-

ing from the written page. Over the next 40 years scattered bits of information could be found embedded within larger publications.

Today African American librarians are employed at the various types of libraries throughout Kentucky. Desegregation, Civil Rights, and Affirmative Action have allowed African Americans the hope of competing for educational and employment opportunities, and to seek advancement within professions. (Kleber 1992, Jaynes & Williams 1989) This include libraries and librarians.

However, the hope of opportunity and advancement were never intended to erase the African American and leave a professional without a history or a continuance of history. It has been 91 years since the Western Colored Branch opened and Thomas Fountain Blue began training African American librarians. This was a first for Kentucky, and the South. Many firsts have taken place since then, and some continue to be the first and no more.

We often hear talk of recruitment and retention of potential African American librarians. It is wise to take heed of the past before planning for a future, perhaps then there will be answers as to why the overall library profession has made little progress in creating a diversified work force (Buttler & Canyon 1992, McCook & Geist 1993, Berry 1994, Curry 1994, Kemp 1994). Or, why African American librarians sometimes feel isolated and have a need to network with each other (Burns 1992).

STARTING WITH BLUE

In 1902 Louisville, Kentucky accepted a \$250,000 grant from philanthropist Andrew Carnegie for the construction of a central library building. A second grant was later

accepted for branch libraries. In May of 1905 the new central library opened its doors to the public, but not to African Americans (Work Projects Administration 1944, Wright 1955).

Slavery was outlawed by the Thirteenth Amendment in the United States in 1865. African Americans were free, but freedom did not take away the confrontations of discrimination, intimidation, and continuous efforts to create a segregated society (Lucas 1992).

Carmen G. Samuels, present manager of the Louisville Free Public Library Western Branch, explains why a library was built for Louisville's African Americans.

"This library was built to placate several of the leaders of this city who had went down to the main library and were refused service. One of them was Alfred Meyzeek. There is a biography called Old War Horse of Kentucky, by J. Benjamin Horton. He (Meyzeek) was known for his efforts for trying to provide equity in education. In essence, they (city leaders) said if we can't be a part of it, build us our own library."

It was decided, a separate branch library would be created. It would be supervised by the Louisville Free Public Library, and Thomas Fountain Blue would be the library manager. Blue was not a trained librarian, he received library training from personnel at the main library. Main library personnel also assisted Blue in training his staff of African American women (Work Projects Administration 1944, Wright 1955).

The Western Colored Branch Library opened September 1, 1905, and become the first free public library for African Americans and managed by African Americans. Now Louisville's more than 39,000 African Americans had their own library, a collection of 1,400 carefully selected books in three rooms of the private residence at 1125 W. Chestnut Street (Wright 1955, Work Projects Administration 1944, Bureau of the Census 1901?). *Up From Slavery*, by Booker T. Washington, was the first book checked-out (Wright 1955).

In 1908 the Western Colored Branch Library relocated to a new building at Tenth and Chestnut Streets (Work Projects Administration 1944, Wright 1955, Josey & Shockley 1977). Carmen G. Samuels said the building itself was a major event.

"At that time Andrew Carnegie was giving grants to libraries, especially for patrons that were underserved. This was a unique experience because there had never been a grant for what was known as a Colored Library. Not a building for Blacks. There were places like a basement room, or you go in the back, or there was a specific room you could go into. But never a complete building."

"When they got the Carnegie grant for the building, the administration immediately separated the department. This was known as the Colored Department. So after this one was built there was another one built out at Eastern. Those two libraries represented the Colored Department. They also had collections at various areas known as Little Africa, Black areas and Black schools. It was a pretty viable and separate system back at the turn of the century."

Eastern Colored Branch was established at Hancock and Lampton Streets in 1912 (Work Projects Administration 1944, Wright 1955).

Blue was now manager of two branch libraries and he had trained the female staff of both branches. News of Blue's library training classes grew to be recognized beyond the public library, and beyond Louisville. Soon he was training African American women throughout the South for library service (Work Projects Administration 1944, Wright 1955). Samuels explains why Blue's training program expanded.

"In the south there was no place for Black librarians to go. The first official library school was Hampton, and that was quite a few years afterwards. There was a need. There were especially more women. Other states in the south were inquiring about this library because they wanted to give some service, but they didn't want them [African Americans] to come and be trained there. That's why he [Blue] starting training librarians."

Blue and his staff were requested at out-of-state libraries to assist in establishing Colored branch libraries. The Carnegie Foundation sent trainees from Africa to Louisville (Wright 1955).

Though Thomas Fountain Blue was what would be known today as a public librarian, his Apprentice Program prepared librarians for school, public, and college librarianship (Spradling 1980).

As Blue's fame grew, he was invited to speak at several conferences including the 1929 American Library Association (ALA) Conference. Blue was the first African American to be placed on an ALA program. He had been invited to speak in recognition of the Louisville Free Public Library's progress in library work among African Americans. Blue and Edward C. Williams, the first African American library school graduate, were the only two African Americans among the 2,808 attending ALA (Work Projects Administration 1944, Wright 1955, Josey & Shockley 1977, Latimer 1994).

Hampton Institute Library School (Virginia) was established in 1925 (Wright 1955, Latimer 1994), and around 1931 Blue's Apprentice Program ended; the number of African Americans obtaining library degrees was on the rise (Work Projects Administration, Wright 1955).

Thomas Fountain Blue died in 1935. His Apprentice Program was used as a prototype for professional training programs in colleges and universities (Wright 1955). His efforts had reached far beyond the three room library and his first trainees.

Five years after Blue's death a former Kentucky librarian became the first African American to earn a Ph. D. in librarianship. Eliza Atkins Gleason earned her doctorate from the University of Chicago and went on to become the first Dean of the newly established School of Library Service. This Negro library school opened in 1941 and was located at Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. The new library school was to replace Hampton Institute Library School which had closed in 1938 after 13 short years of existence (Jones 1970, Josey & Shockley 1977).

Virginia Lacy Jones was the second dean of the Atlanta University School of Library Service (1945). She was also the second African American to earn a Ph. D. in librarianship. The degree was received from the University of Chicago in 1945 (Josey 1970, Josey & Shockley 1977).

Jones was also a former Kentucky Librarian, she had worked under Gleason as an assistant

librarian at the Louisville Municipal College, the Negro branch of the University of Louisville. Jones returned to the Municipal College in 1936 as head librarian. During her tenure at the College, Jones and Ann Rucker Anderson, librarian at Kentucky State College, organized a librarians group (Josey 1970, Spradling 1980). The group was approved as a conference of the Kentucky Negro Education Association (K.N.E.A.) in 1935 (K.N.E.A. Journal¹ 1935).

The conference continued as a part of K.N.E.A. into the 1950's. K.N.E.A. changed its name to Kentucky Teachers Association, and eventually merged into the Kentucky Educational Association (KEA). Prior to the merger there had been no African American members in KEA. The Kentucky Library Association (KLA) started to admit African American members in the mid 1940's. But, K.N.E.A. had been the organization for Kentucky's African American educators and librarians (Spradling 1980). The merger/desegregation meant the end of K.N.E.A. and its journal. Written records of Kentucky African American librarians and activities became a rare thing. Times were changing, what could be the benefit of identifying a librarian's race?

A skilled search is required to find information such as the election of Rebecca T. Bingham as the first African American president of KLA (Josey & Shockley 1977), or the 1976 paper by Mary Mace Spradling titled *Black Librarians in Kentucky*².

Over the past twenty years the Kentucky African American librarian has been moved of the printed page into the word of mouth; someone knows of the one at institution 'X' or the two at school 'Y', and the word gets passed on. The following table offers names and individual experiences to accompany the verbal references. Individuals listed in the table do not speak for all Kentucky African Americans librarians. Nor do they represent the total number of African American librarians in Kentucky, there are many more³. A much larger publication is needed in order to account for the total experience of African American librarians in the state of Kentucky.

REBECCA L. BISHOP

Librarian/Media Specialist
at Central Hardin High School,
Cecilia, KY
Hometown: Sonora, KY
Bachelors: English & Library Science minor –
University of Kentucky
Masters: Education (Reading) –
University of Kentucky
Other: Rank I – Western KY University
Comments: Rebecca said that she did not know
any other African American librarians and
would not mind meeting others. She also said
that she did not feel isolated. "Starting from
elementary school, I have been the only Black
kid in my class." When asked about starting an
African American librarian's group, Rebecca
said, "I probably wouldn't start an organization.
I don't like for us to separate ourselves from
the world. We have to live with everyone and
not just within ourselves."

OUIDA HERRING

Librarian/Media Specialist
at Eastern High School, Louisville, KY
Hometown: Louisville, KY
Bachelors: Library Science –
Spalding University (KY)
Masters: Library Science –
Spalding University (KY)
Other: Post-graduate work –
University of Louisville (KY)
Comments: Ouida said she knew some African
American librarians and would like to meet
others. "Within Jefferson County Public
Schools I know some, I know a couple of
retired public librarians, and I have met Karen
McDaniel at Kentucky State. Except for
Karen, I don't know anyone outside Jefferson
County. I am always saying where are we, I
know we are out here somewhere."

TEZETA LYNES

Branch Manager of Program Development
at KY Department of Libraries & Archives,
Frankfort, KY
Hometown: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Bachelors: Elementary Education –
Middle East College (Beruit, Lebanon)
Masters: Teaching –
Andrews University (MI)
Other: Library Science –
Western Michigan University
Comments: Tezeta said that she knows a few
African American librarians in public and aca-
demic libraries. Tezeta said she does feel isolat-
ed and is looking forward to the 1997 National
Conference of African American Librarians⁴.
"I figure that is a good place to meet others."

SHAWN LIVINGSTON

Public Service Librarian-King Library
at University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY
Hometown: Lexington, KY
Bachelors: Psychology –
Transylvania University (KY)
Masters: Library Science –
University of Kentucky
Comments: Shawn says that he knows the
African American librarians at the University
of Kentucky and Karen McDaniel at Kentucky
State. Shawn went on to say that there are
times when he does feel isolated. "Particularly
at faculty and staff meetings. It's just strange.
It's something I've dealt with all my life, but
you never get used to it. You look around and
you are the only Black face, or one of two in
the room."

KAREN MCDANIEL

Director of Libraries
at Kentucky State University,
Frankfort, KY
Hometown: Williamsburg, KY
Bachelors: Business – Berea College (KY)
Masters: Library Science –
University of Kentucky
Comments: "It wasn't in my career plans to be
a librarian. I knew I wanted another degree. I
applied to the business school and I applied to
the library science program. The library school
[UK] had a guy named Henry Totten⁵, he is a
Black gentleman, he gave me a call that there
was funding through the Office of Education.
It was minority fellowships in library science.
He [Totten] was assistant director or something
like that. I met him when I was going to turn
in my forms. I had a friend who was in library
science school and she told me he was a Black
guy. I was surprised. As I was getting on the
elevator, he [Totten] was getting off. We shook
hands, I told him I appreciate his bringing this
[the fellowship] to my attention. That was the
last time I ever saw him. I got the fellowship."

MICHAEL RAZEEQ

Reference Librarian-Engineering Library
at University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY
Hometown: Cleveland, Ohio
Bachelors: Sociology & Anthropology –
Hiram College (OH)

Masters: Library Science –
Case Western Reserve (OH)

Comments: "As a librarian I have found that I have gone to meetings constantly in Kentucky and I have felt like people are uncomfortable with me, are avoiding me. Or they have their groups and I am not brought in. I don't expect any kind of special treatment. But I feel that people should have the common social graces to recognize you. That didn't happen and it made me feel isolated. It took me a long time to realize it, but I discovered that if I wanted to advance and network, I can go to national conferences. I can go to out-of-state conferences. I was a born-again librarian when I went to the 1st National Conference of African American Librarians!"

CARMEN SAMUELS

Branch Manager
at Louisville Free Public Library, Louisville, KY
Hometown: Terra Haute, Indiana
Bachelors: French with English minor –
Indiana State University (IN)

Masters: Library Science –
Indiana State University (IN)

Comments: "I guess by the sense that we serve the public and the public comes in all colors and hues and all different types of needs, I don't think I feel isolated. I feel frustrated at times because I feel like there should be more than what we have recorded. We should have more information. There are so many local figures who have not received the credit for what they have done for the state of Kentucky and they are not known. That kind of thing frustrates me when you know there are people who have done things and there's no written record of it. A lot of our history is being lost."

RAAMESIE UMANDAVI

Reference/Government Documents Librarian
at Kentucky State University, Frankfort, KY
Hometown: Franklin, KY
Bachelors: Journalism & English –
University of Kentucky

Masters: Library Science – University of KY
(will be completed summer 1996)

Comments: (Raamesie was a graduate assistant at the University of Kentucky at the time of the interview.) "I knew there was the program; when I was working in the Communications Reading Room there was another student who was considering the program. That's how I

knew it at least existed. I had not even thought about librarianship as a possibility. It was the furthest thing from my mind."

LINDA UMBAYEMAKE

Public Service Librarian
at Owensboro Community College,
Owensboro, KY

Hometown: Cleveland, Ohio

Bachelors: Geography –
Kent State University (OH)

Masters: Library Science –
Texas Women's University

Comments: "When I was first got into the profession I felt isolated, but then I found the Black Caucus. I was almost getting ready to finish library school and a friend of mine, a White lady, told me to go to a meeting with her. I went with her and it was the Black Caucus. I've gone to one every since."

VERONICA WALKER

Original Cataloger
at University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY
Hometown: Columbia, South Carolina

Bachelors: Accounting –
Clemson University (SC)

Masters: Library Science –
University of Kentucky

Comments: Veronica said she didn't know about library science as an undergraduate. "I've always loved books. My undergraduate degree is in accounting, I'm a detail-oriented person. It wasn't until I graduated and was working, I realized I wanted to go back to school in library science. I wanted to be a corporate librarian. Once I got in the program I found myself gearing toward technical services."

BETTIE P. WHITLOCK

Elementary School Librarian
at Dishman McGinnis Elementary School,
Bowling Green, KY

Hometown: Bowling Green, KY

Bachelors: Library Science & Folk Studies –
Western Kentucky University

Masters: Library Science –
Western Kentucky University

Other: Rank I – Western Kentucky University

Comments: "When I was in the third grade High Street was a predominately Black school. We had a Black librarian. She's still alive. She was to me the epitome of any and everything that should be done as a woman. In the third grade I decided I wanted to be a school librarian. This is an area Blacks don't think about going into. If you were not like I was and went to a predominately Black school where you saw Black librarians, then you wouldn't think this was something you could do."

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ According to Karen McDaniel, Director of Kentucky State University Libraries, all issues of the K.N.E.A. Journal may be found in the Blazer Library Archives.
- ² Spradling's paper was presented in 1976 for a colloquium sponsored by the School of Library Science, North Carolina Central University. The paper was published in 1980 in *The Black Librarian in the Southeast*.
- ³ See Spradling's article for an older, but more extensive listing of Kentucky's African American librarians and library employees.
- ⁴ The 1997 National Conference of African American Librarians is sponsored by the Black Caucus of ALA and will be held July 30th – August 4th in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
- ⁵ Henry Totten was the Associate Dean of the University of Kentucky College of Library Science from 1971 to 1974.

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